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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000625

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SUBJECT: ASAD WARNS THAT STRIKING IRAQ WOULD CREATE
CHAOS IN REGION

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CLASSIFIED BY CDA PHILO L. DIBBLE, REASONS 1.5 B/D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. IN A WIDE-RANGING INTERVIEW WITH ITALIAN DAILY CORRIERE DELLA SERA, BASHAR AL-ASAD WARNED THAT A STRIKE AGAINST IRAQ WOULD DESTABILIZE THE REGION. HE ALSO DENIED THAT SYRIAN OIL IMPORTS OF IRAQI OIL VIOLATED UNSCRS; REPEATED SYRIA'S COMMITMENT TO A COMPREHENSIVE PEACE; SAID THE U.S. ADMINISTRATION LACKS A CLEAR VISION REGARDING THE MEPN AND SPEAKS WITH A MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES; CLAIMED A "FREE PRESS" AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AMONG THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF HIS PRESIDENCY; SAID INDIVIDUAL HUMAN RIGHTS MUST NOT CONFLICT WITH THE RIGHTS OF SOCIETY; SAID HIS PERSONAL INTERESTS INCLUDE EXERCISING, READING ABOUT HISTORY, COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND "ANYTHING DIGITAL;" AND CALLED FOR INCREASED DIRECT CONTACTS BETWEEN THE WEST AND MUSLIM COUNTRIES TO OVERCOME GLOBAL MISUNDERSTANDING. ASAD'S INTERVIEW WAS NOTEWORTHY FOR THE WIDE RANGE OF SUBJECTS DISCUSSED, HIS EVIDENT SELF-CONFIDENCE, AND THE EVOLUTION OF A PROFESSORIAL STYLE THAT RESULTS IN LENGTHY (AND SOMETIMES UNWISE) EXPLANATIONS OF SYRIAN POSITIONS. HE REMAINS, IN OUR VIEW, VERY MUCH A WORK IN PROGRESS, BUT ONE WHOSE PROFESSED INTEREST IN ENGAGING THE WEST IS WORTH TESTING. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) IN AN INTERVIEW PUBLISHED IN THE ITALIAN DAILY "CORRIERE DELLA SERA," IN ADVANCE OF HIS 19 FEBRUARY VISIT TO ITALY, SYRIAN PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASAD COVERED TOPICS RANGING FROM IRAQ AND THE MEPN TO HIS HOBBIES. THREE VERSIONS OF THE INTERVIEW APPEARED: THE CORRIERE DELLA SERA PUBLISHED EXCERPTS OF THE INTERVIEW IN ITALIAN (TRANSLATED BY FBIS IN REFTEL), WHILE SYRIAN AND REGIONAL ARABIC MEDIA PUBLISHED A LONGER "FULL TEXT" IN ARABIC, AND THE SYRIA TIMES PUBLISHED A "FULL TEXT" IN ENGLISH THAT INCLUDED ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS THAT WERE NOT IN THE ITALIAN OR ARABIC VERSIONS. HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SYRIA TIMES VERSION OF THE INTERVIEW FOLLOW.

WARNING ON IRAQ

¶3. (U) "WHAT I ASK MYSELF IS THIS: IS THERE ANY JUSTIFICATION FOR AN ATTACK ON IRAQ? DOES AN ATTACK BY ANY CHANCE FORM PART OF THE STRUGGLE AGAINST TERRORISM? IN ATTACKING IRAQ DOES ONE DEFEND JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY, OR DOES ONE FUEL PRECISELY INJUSTICE AND THE ABSENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS? I BELIEVE THAT AN ATTACK WOULD BE AGAINST JUSTICE AND AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS. ALL THE ARAB AND MUSLIM COUNTRIES, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, ARE OPPOSED TO IT. AND ALL THE EUROPEAN ENVOYS WITH WHOM I HAVE MET, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, HAVE EXPRESSED THEMSELVES IN THE SAME WAY."

¶4. (U) "AN ATTACK ON IRAQ WOULD BE EXTREMELY SERIOUS. THE PEOPLE'S WRATH WOULD BECOME FAR MORE DANGEROUS THAN POLITICAL REACTIONS. I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE UNITED STATES NEEDS TO ATTRACT ANY FURTHER HATRED."

SYRIA/IRAQ PIPELINE NOT A VIOLATION?

15. (C) FROM ARABIC VERSION: "CONCERNING THE OIL, WE ANNOUNCED OUR OPINION VERY CLEARLY FROM THE BEGINNING. WE SAID THAT THERE WAS OLD OIL PIPELINE BETWEEN US AND IRAQ THAT WE TESTED LAST YEAR. WHEN WE SAY WE ARE TESTING, WE ARE DEFINITELY TESTING IT WITH OIL AND NOT WITH WATER OR AIR. AND CERTAINLY THE DIRECTION IS FROM IRAQ TO SYRIA BECAUSE WE HAVE NO OIL TO SEND TO IRAQ. AND I HAVE SAID THIS TO AMERICAN OFFICIALS. BUT THIS IS A VERY OLD PIPELINE THAT HAS BEEN THERE SINCE THE FIFTIES, AND WHEN WE HAD OUR POLITICAL DIFFERENCES WITH IRAQ, THIS PIPELINE WAS NOT USED. ITS OPERATION IS DIFFICULT, WHICH PROMPTED US TO ANNOUNCE THAT WE ARE GOING TO BUILD A NEW PIPELINE WITH MUCH BIGGER CAPACITY. AND WE WERE DISCUSSING THIS PIPELINE WITH COUNTRIES IN THE REGION AND WITH EUROPEAN COUNTRIES. AND WE SAID THAT WITH THIS NEW PIPELINE OR IN ANY OIL TRANSACTIONS WITH IRAQ, WE WILL ABIDE BY UN RESOLUTIONS."

16. (U) THE SYRIA TIMES VERSION ADDS: "AND WE SAID THAT WITH THIS NEW PIPELINE WITH IRAQ, WE ARE GOING TO BE COMMITTED TO UN RESOLUTIONS AND WE WERE SUPPOSED TO SUBMIT A REQUEST FOR A MEETING THAT THE UN SHOULD CONVENE ABOUT THIS ISSUE AT THE END OF LAST SUMMER, AND THEN THIS MEETING WAS POSTPONED. AND THEREFORE, WE ARE NOT VIOLATING ANY U.N. RESOLUTIONS."

NO CONDITIONS FOR PEACE

17. (U) "SYRIA HAS NEVER SET ANY CONDITIONS, AND WE ALWAYS SAY THAT SYRIA DOES NOT HAVE CERTAIN CONDITIONS AT ALL. WHEN SYRIA SPEAKS ABOUT THE BASES FOR PEACE IT REFERS TO THE NECESSITY OF IMPLEMENTING SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS AND MADRID'S TERMS OF REFERENCE. THESE TERMS OF REFERENCE WERE NOT INVENTED BY SYRIA, RATHER THEY WERE AMERICAN IDEAS AND THEY BECAME INTERNATIONAL RESOLUTIONS ONCE THEY WERE APPROVED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY. ... HENCE, OUR CONDITIONS ARE THE CONDITIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND THEY STIPULATE THE FULL RETURN OF SYRIAN RIGHTS."

AMERICA HAS NO VISION

18. (U) "UNTIL NOW THE ROLE THAT HAD BEEN GIVEN TO EUROPE BY THE UNITED STATES IS TO MARKET AMERICAN IDEAS, BUT HAS NOT YET BEEN ALLOWED TO PLAY A ROLE OF ITS OWN MAKING. BUT EVEN THE AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION DOESN'T HAVE A CLEAR VISION OF HOW TO CONDUCT THIS PEACE PROCESS. ...I CAN'T SEE THAT THE CIRCUMSTANCES ARE PREPARED FOR THIS ROLE UNLESS EUROPE WANTS TO PLAY THIS ROLE IN AN INDEPENDENT FASHION."

AND SPEAKS WITH A MULTIPLICITY OF VOICES

19. (U) "I THINK THAT IF THE AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION IS ABLE TO FORMULATE A SINGLE OPINION, THEN THEY COULD PROBABLY HAVE COOPERATION WITH EUROPE. BUT YOU NEED FIRST TO HAVE A SINGLE OPINION. THIS IS WHAT I SAID TO WILLIAM BURNS, THE U.S. ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE, WHEN HE VISITED ME IN DAMASCUS TWO MONTHS AGO. I SAID TO HIM: YOU ARE A GROUP OF ADMINISTRATIONS, NOT JUST ONE ADMINISTRATION. EACH ONE OF YOUR ADMINISTRATIONS HAS A DIFFERENT OPINION."

LEBANON: OUR PRESENCE IS TEMPORARY

110. (U) "WE DON'T BUILD OUR RELATIONS WITH LEBANON ON THE BASIS OF THE MILITARY PRESENCE. ...THE PRESENCE IS A TEMPORARY ONE. I THINK THE ACTUAL ACT OF REDEPLOYMENT IS SUBJECT TO A MILITARY FACTOR AND THE

CONDITIONS THAT INFLUENCE THIS, PARTICULARLY THE SOUTH OF LEBANON AND THE ISRAELI SITUATION."

¶11. (U) [ASKED ABOUT SYRIAN RELATIONS WITH ELIE HOBEIKA] "IN FACT, THE ONE WHO SUPERVISED AND INITIATED THE KILLINGS IS SHARON PERSONALLY." (ASAD DID NOT MENTION HOBEIKA.)

GET TO THE ROOT CAUSES OF TERRORISM

¶12. (U) [REGARDING SUICIDE BOMBERS] "I CAN BRIEFLY SAY THAT THE FRAME OF MIND THAT PUSHES PEOPLE TO DIE IS THE RESULT OF THE ACCUMULATION OF HUGE FRUSTRATION AND OPPRESSION THAT IS PRACTICED AGAINST THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE. WHETHER THE WEST AGREES OR DIFFERS WITH THEM, THEY ARE THE RESULT OF ISRAELI TERRORISM AGAINST THEM. WESTERN OFFICIALS WASTE THEIR TIME IN CONDEMNING THESE PEOPLE. WHY DON'T THEY GET REALISTIC AND GO BACK TO THE ROOT CAUSES? THESE PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT IF THEY DON'T GO DIE IN ISRAEL, THEY ARE GOING TO BE KILLED IN THEIR OWN HOUSES, BECAUSE SHARON IS COMING TO THEM IN THEIR HOUSES. WE THINK, REGARDLESS OF OUR OWN PERSONAL OPINIONS, THAT THE ONLY SOLUTION IS TO ADDRESS THE REAL CAUSE OF THIS PROBLEM BY EXERTING PRESSURE ON ISRAEL TO STOP KILLING THE PALESTINIANS."

SYRIAN UN REP COMMENTS ON 9/11

¶13. (U) [NO APOLOGY, BUT A LENGTHY EXPLANATION ABOUT DIFFERING FRAMES OF REFERENCE; ESSENTIALLY, PEOPLE FEEL MOST STRONGLY WHAT IS RELEVANT TO THEM AND THE COMPARISON WAS BETWEEN 9/11 AND THE ACCUMULATION OF THE PAIN INFLICTED UPON PALESTINIANS AND ARABS BY ISRAEL SINCE 1948.]

ISLAM AND THE WEST

¶14. (U) IS THERE A BOOK FOR WESTERN READERS THAT CAN EXPLAIN THE RELATION BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC WORLD AND THE WESTERN WORLD?] "REGRETTABLY, MOST OF THE BOOKS AVAILABLE NOW ARE WRITTEN BY NON-MUSLIMS. WE ARE DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN SYRIA, WE ARE TRYING TO CALL FOR OTHER COUNTRIES TO CONDUCT WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS ABOUT ISLAM. THIS IS WHAT WE DID WITH THE AMERICANS AND THE EUROPEANS; WE SHALL CONTINUE THESE DIALOGUES WITH DIFFERENT COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD ABOUT MEDIA, ACADEMIA, CULTURE, AND BUSINESS. I ADVISE THAT DIRECT CONTACT, PERSONAL CONTACT BE ESTABLISHED."

HUMAN RIGHTS

¶15. (U) "FIRST, WE SAY HUMAN RIGHTS, BUT WE CAN'T SEPARATE BETWEEN THE RIGHT OF ONE PERSON AND THE RIGHT OF SOCIETY. SECOND, WHEN WE SAY THE RIGHT OF ONE PERSON, IT MEANS HIS RIGHT TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE IMPROVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY, BUT HE HAS NO RIGHT TO UNDERMINE THE INTEREST OF HIS COUNTRY. I THINK THAT SOCIETIES HAVE DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF THESE RIGHTS ACCORDING TO THEIR CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS. THEREFORE, THE POLITICAL PRISONERS YOU HAVE TALKED ABOUT WERE IMPRISONED BECAUSE THERE WERE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT WERE DIFFICULT AND THEY HARMED THE REAL INTEREST OF THEIR OWN COUNTRY. THE LARGE NUMBER OF POLITICAL PRISONERS THAT WERE LET FREE WAS DURING THE TIME OF THE LATE PRESIDENT HAFIZ AL-ASAD, BECAUSE THE CIRCUMSTANCES HAVE CHANGED."

ACHIEVEMENTS OF HIS PRESIDENCY?

¶16. (U) "WE HAVE ISSUED LAWS IN MANY DOMAINS. WE STARTED LARGE SCALE TRAINING OF PEOPLE IN COOPERATION WITH THE EU IN DIFFERENT FIELDS. WE STARTED A GREATER PARTICIPATION OF ORDINARY PEOPLE TO HELP IN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE STATE DOING THEIR WORK. WE ACTIVATED A REAL DIALOGUE AMONG THE SYRIAN PEOPLE ABOUT THE SYRIAN VISION OF THE FUTURE. ...WE PERMITTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN SYRIA AND WE ALLOWED FREE PRESS IN SYRIA! A FEW WEEKS AGO WE STARTED INDEPENDENT BROADCASTING STATIONS."

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

¶17. (U) [ASKED WHETHER BEING A PRESIDENT WAS RESTRICTIVE, SINCE HE COULDN'T GO TO THE CINEMA LIKE ORDINARY FOLKS.] "I DON'T HAVE THE HOBBY OF GOING TO THE CINEMA, BUT I LIKE TO MEET PEOPLE A LOT. AND I DO THAT, I MIX WITH PEOPLE JUST AS I USED TO DO BEFORE I BECAME A PRESIDENT, BUT LESS OFTEN BECAUSE I HAVE LESS TIME." [INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT IS YOUR HOBBY?] "I EXERCISE A LOT AND I READ A LOT." [ABOUT WHAT?] "MOSTLY HISTORY. AND I LOVE TO GET TO KNOW NEW INVENTIONS, ESPECIALLY ABOUT THE COMPUTER AND NEW TECHNOLOGY, EVERYTHING DIGITAL." [ARE YOU FOND OF FOOTBALL CLUBS?] "NO." [NOT EVEN WHEN YOU WERE IN LONDON?] "NO."

¶18. (C) COMMENT: NOW APPARENTLY A STANDARD PRACTICE IN ADVANCE OF VISITS ABROAD, ASAD'S INTERVIEW WAS NOTEWORTHY FOR THE WIDE RANGE OF SUBJECTS DISCUSSED, HIS EVIDENT SELF-CONFIDENCE, AND THE EVOLUTION OF A PROFESSORIAL STYLE THAT RESULTS IN LENGTHY (AND SOMETIMES UNWISE) EXPLANATIONS OF SYRIAN POSITIONS. HIS ACCOUNT OF WHY SYRIA'S ILLICIT OIL IMPORTS FROM IRAQ ARE NOT VIOLATING UNSCRS IS UNINFORMED OR DISINGENUOUS. HIS TALLYING OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS, IF LESS OUT OF SYNC WITH REALITY THAN BA'THI PROPAGANDA, STILL STRAINS THE CREDULITY OF OBJECTIVE OBSERVERS. WE WERE STRUCK BY HIS WILLINGNESS TO DISCUSS PURELY PERSONAL TOPICS. HIS PREFERENCES (A COMPLETE LACK OF INTEREST IN FOOTBALL; INTEREST IN EXERCISE AND A PASSION FOR TECHNOLOGY) SET HIM FAR APART FROM THE OLD GUARD OBSERVERS ON WHOM HE STILL DEPENDS. HE REMAINS, IN OUR VIEW, VERY MUCH A WORK IN PROGRESS, BUT ONE WHOSE PROFESSED INTEREST IN ENGAGING THE WEST IS WORTH TESTING. END COMMENT.

DIBBLE